

**Editor's Note:**

This account was originally composed in French, but translated into English by Francis Magnus and published in Calcutta at the Joseph Cooper Press in 1789, the year of the French Revolution. It was published within the multi-volume travels (Vol. III, book 4, chapter 2) of the Commissary of the Marine, Monsieur Sonnerat, entitled, *A Voyage to the East-Indies and China; Performed by Order of Lewis XV. Between the Years 1774 and 1781. Containing A Description of the Manners, Religion, Arts, and Scieneces, of the Indians, Chinese, Pegouins, and of the Islanders of Madagascar; Also Observations on the Cape of Good Hope, the Isles of Ceylon, Malacca, the Phillipines, and Moluccas.* As only the account to Pegu is included here, “A French Voyage to Pegu” has been decided upon as the title for this edition.

M. W. C.

---

## A VOYAGE TO PEGU

### **Monsieur Sonnerat**

When the Portuguese established themselves in the country of Pegu, they found it divided into two kingdoms. The Abassys, known to the Europeans by the name of Pegouins, inhabited the kingdom of Pegu; and the Barmans that of Ava. These nations, governed by rival powers, did not long preserve a good understanding. The King of Ava, jealous of the commerce of his neighbours, assembled a numerous army in 1685, and declared war against them. Being conqueror, he destroyed their king with all his family, and wanted to annihilate even the name of Pegu. These two states, reunited under his dominion, were now only one kingdom, which extends on the north to China; the east, is bounded by Tonquin, Quinam, and Cochin China; the south by the kingdom of Siam; and the west, in part, by the sea; and going upwards, it terminates at Chittigong, which borders upon Bengal.

In 1735, the conquered Pegouins shook off the yoke, and revenged the blood of their ancient masters; and as a just return they massacred the tyrant with all his family; and no legitimate prince remaining, they elected a new king. By the resolution of this prince, a calm soon succeeded: and when by his courage, and the punishment of the seditious, he had established his power, he employed himself in restoring his kingdom to its former splendor, and revived its commerce. The

Europeans were attracted; and the English, taking advantage of this revolution, established several factories, such as those on the great and little Negrais, at Bacim, and on the western point of the coast of Pegu. At the same period, the Zelanders, driven out of Banqui-bazard, by Allavirdy Khan, nabob of Bengal, took shelter in Pegu, where they wanted to establish themselves by force of arms; but, too feeble for the execution of such an enterprise, they were all massacred.

The French availed themselves of the good dispositions of this prince, and turned them to much better account. Mr. Dupleix, Governor-General in India, sent an ambassador to him with considerable presents, in the year 1751; and the French obtained of the king of Pegu permission to settle themselves at Syriam, where they would still have remained but for the following revolution. [Syriam is] A city of Pegu, where the Europeans formerly carried on their commerce. Though this city is now no more, the river still preserves the name of Syriam, a name which it has also given to the beautiful Siriam Granats, so improperly called Syrien.<sup>1</sup>

The standard of revolt, after twenty years peace, was raised by a simple countryman, of Barman origin, and whose name was Alompra. Followed by some husbandmen, of whom he was the chief, he was resolved to become the deliverer of his nation, and free it from the yoke of the Pegouins. These rebels, armed only with a club, had some little success on their first attempt. The king of Pegu, despising such an enemy, made but a feeble opposition; but, in the sequel, he experienced that there is no enemy who is not dangerous. Alompra's party grew more formidable every day, and he soon saw himself at the head of twenty thousand Barmans, by whose assistance he seized on the capital of the kingdom, where he found arms and stores. This conquest increasing his ambition, he caused himself to be proclaimed king; went down the river with surprising rapidity, and encamped two leagfues from Siriam, on the very spot where he laid foundation of the city of Rangon, which is since become the staple of commerce. He besieged Siriam, which he razed, in order to punish the inhabitants of having resisted his attempt during the space of eighteen months.

Alompra and the French had agreed upon a neutrality, which, however, was not adhered to by the latter. The king of Pegu had sent for assistance from Pondicherry: they there debated a long time on the subject; but at last, in July 1756, some troops and ammunition were sent him in two vessels, named *le Diligent*, and *la Galathée*. Though the last ship arrived long before the other, she could not anchor at Siriam till two days after the reduction of that city, and the captain fell into a snare which Alompra had laid for him. This conqueror, exasperated at the French, seized their vessel, beheaded all the officers, as well as the agent of the French nation, and imprisoned the soldiers and sailors.

---

<sup>1</sup> These two lines have been pulled up from the notes. M.W.C.

*Le Diligent* being obliged to put in at the Nicobars, did not arrive till six weeks after la Galathée; but the Captain, more prudent than the other, entered the river with precaution, and when he heard of the French being massacred, returned to Pondicherry.

Alompra employed the soldiers and ammunition taken in la Galathée to great advantage. After having promised a reward to the former, he blocked up the king of Pegu in his capital. The king held out against the besieger till the month of May, 1757, when he found himself obliged to surrender. The conqueror, to get rid of his rival, made use of the following strategem. It was recorded in their annals; that the person who should put a crown on the pagoda of Rangon, should overcome all his enemies, and be acknowledged for the most powerful king. He caused a crown of gold to be made, enriched with diamonds and rubies, weighing as much as himself, his wife and children, and after having placed it on the cone of the pagoda, in presence of the king his prisoner, he asked him if he would acknowledge his superiority; when the other replying in the negative, he was beheaded.

During these troubles, the English fortified themselves in their settlements of Bacim and the Negrais; as they were the only Europeans that had the prudence to build forts. The new king became suspicious of them; he attacked them several times at the head of his Barmans, but was always repulsed. However, at last, by employing the French, he drove them entirely out of the kingdom.

That depopulation and wretchedness are inevitable consequences of war, is well known; and when Alompre would have enjoyed the fruit of his labours, he was afflicted to find he reigned over ruins alone. He saw no other remedy than the conquest of Siam, and to disperse through his own territories the men that in this conquest he might have subjected to him. In consequence of such revolution, he set out, attended by forty thousand men, and in his route seized upon Tavay, Tennasserin, and Merqui. He soon penetrated as far as Siam, which he besieged, and would doubtless have taken it, if a dysentery, the effect of fatigue, during so long and so toilsome a siege, had not carried him off, in September 1760, in the fiftieth year of his life.

His sons, who had followed him in his expedition, caused his body to be embalmed and sent to Pegu, with all the pomp due to his memory. The eldest, whose name was Kandropa, was declared his successor. The friend of peace, he governed his kingdom with wisdom; but after a peacable reign of five years he died, without leaving any heirs, and the crown passed to Zekinmedou, his brother.

Zekinmedou, following the steps of Alompra, renewed the war with the Siamese, and was so fortunate as to finish with glory what his father had commenced with courage. Siam was conquered, and the king and his family made prisoners. This unfortunate prince, stripped of his kingdoms, presents to this day at Ava the most striking example of the vicissitudes of fortune; those hands,

accustomed to hold a sceptre, have been forced to inure themselves to the vilest tasks. Deprived of all his riches, and reduced to misery in the extreme. The conqueror seems only to have spared his life, that he might the more ardently make him wish for his death,

After having dispersed many thousand Siamese prisoners, in all parts of his kingdom, Zekinmedou subdued the Cassayans, and declared war against the Chinese. This populous nation found no difficulty in opposing him with an army of an hundred thousand men: Zekinmedou's troops were no more than thirty thousand, but he attacked them with such fury, that they were soon routed, and sixty thousand prisoners taken, who were sent to cultivate the land in the environs of Ava.

It was nearly at this time, that is to say, in the year 1769, that the French East India Company asked his permission to re-establish their commerce in Pegue. The prince received the deputy who was sent, with great distinction—gave him the most singular marks of his esteem for the French nation, and sent him back to the council of Pondicherry, charged with a letter addressed to them, in the following terms:

I, the Emperor of Ava, King of Kings, omnipotent, inform you, that I have received the letter given to me by your ambassador, Mr. Feraud, with the presents, consisting of one piece of red velvet, one of black velvet, a third of yellow velvet, five pieces of gold and silver stuffs, five parcels of gold and silver lace, eight hundred and twenty-four small knives, a double barrelled gun, inlaid with gold, five hundred and twenty-five muskets, two hundred and eighty-six cannon balls, eighteen hundred musket balls, one hundred grenades, a cask of flints, and ten barrels of gun-powder. I have also received the letter which your ambassador sent, and which has been interpreted by Millard, my slave.<sup>2</sup> I have received your ambassador in my golden palace. With respect to the requests you make, I cannot grant you the island of Molucca, because it is a suspicious place: neither will I give up the five Frenchmen. You also mention their pay, and you ask for a person to settle their account: all this I leave to the disposal of Millard. I exempt you from all duties, and grant you a free trade. I also cede to you that place to the south of Rangon, called Mangthu; the extent of the ground along the bank of the river is 500 Thas,<sup>3</sup> and the breadth of two hundred, which the governor of Rangon will cause to be measured. All the French vessels that anchor in the port of the French settlement, shall be obliged to render an account of their merchandize and other effects to the governor of Rangon, in order to see what

---

<sup>2</sup> Original footnote: Mr. Millard went to Pegu, on board the Galathée, as a volunteer; he had the good fortune to escape the general massacre of the French, and to gain the king's friendship, who appointed him grand master of the artillery, and captain of his guards. On several occasions, he was very serviceable to the French, particularly to Mr. Gouyon, commander of the Castries, who happened to be at Pegu during the disturbances in 1775, when the French were suspected of favouring the rebels. Millard died in 1778.

<sup>3</sup> Original footnote: A Thas is ten feet and a half.

presents I should exact, to indemnify myself for the duties. No warlike ammunition is to be sold by you in my dominions, without my license. I have sent in consequence my orders to the governor of Rangon. When any French vessels arrive, he will take care to go on board, and as soon as the goods are in the warehouse, he will put the chap on them.

All French ships which anchor in the French settlement, shall be obliged to bring their rudders on shore.

I send you your ambassador, with the concessions I have made him.

Given the 12<sup>th</sup> of the Moon, of the month of Kchong, 1132.

The French East India Company obtained at that time a considerable spot of ground at Rangon, with the license of building warehouses and hoisting the French colours, and are the only nation to whom the king of Pegu has yet granted that privilege, which the English, Dutch and Armenians were never able to obtain. But the Company, not knowing how to profit by these advantages, the French who at present trade to this country are no longer distinguished from other nations; the sovereign even esteems them as slaves the moment they set foot on his territories.

The Siamese remained but a short time subject to the laws of the Barmans: those who, to avoid slavery, retired to the woods, assembled, elected a king of Chinese extraction, and marching under his standard, drove the Pegouins and Barmans out of the kingdom of Siam. The king of Ava wanted, a second time, to subdue them, and for that purpose assembled numerous troops of Pegouins and Barmans, in the year 1775. The Pegouins, whose force was superior, revolted, massacred the greatest part of the Barmans, and directed their arms against Tangon; but having no officers to lead them on, the enterprize miscarried without causing any revolution.

Zekinmedou established tranquility in his kingdom, and died the following year. According to the will of Alompra, his brothers should successively have mounted the throne; but, some time before his death, Zekinmedou caused his eldest son to be acknowledged king, who accordingly succeeded to the diadem, at the age of twenty-two. To avoid any disputes with his uncles, who were five in number, he massacred them all, as well as his own brothers, and the great men who were their adherents. By these abominable murders, he this day finds himself peaceable possessor of a sceptre, polluted with blood, and tarnished by the impure hands which hold it.

The Pegouins and Barmans are not divided into casts or tribes. They are all of the same religion, which, in its principle, seems to be that of the Bramins: the doctrine of the metempsychosis is the foundation; but so much disfigured at this day, that they feed on all sorts of animals, even of beef, provided they are not the slaughterers.

They have seven principal deities; the first five are incarnated, and have already lived upon earth, to teach men the knowledge of virtue.

The other two are, sometime or other, to revive the happy times of the first ages. However, they adore one God alone, whom they call Godeman; he is the last of the five that have been incarnated, and seems to be the same as Vichenou.

The precise time of his terrestrial life is not told in the sacred volumes. They only say that when dying, he promised to disperse his infinite grace during six thousand years on those who invoked him. To obtain his favour, the Pegouins and Barmans regularly visit his pagoda once a week; and on festival days they chant his praises, burn tapers before his image, and offer him meats, fish, vegetables, and boiled rice. These offerings become the prey of dogs and other animals, who have free ingress and egress of the pagoda.

Their temples are decently adorned, and not filled with obscene figures, like those of the inhabitants of the Coromandel coast, Malabar, and Bengal. The pagoda of Kelkel, near Siam, is held in a particular veneration by the Pegouins, while the Barmans are equally attached to that of Digon, near Rangon. The construction of the latter is very singular; it terminates in a cone, and has neither door nor window. The princes, nobles, and people throw immense riches they bring for offerings, through a hole made at the top, over which is seen the crown of gold, placed there by Alompra. This should be one of the richest treasures in the world, if the Barmans have not found the method of pillaging the pagoda, by some subterraneous passage.

When they build a pagoda, a barbarous custom exists of flinging the first people who pass by into the foundation. This shocking ceremony is, however, very frequent, as they consecrate almost all their wealth to building such edifices, which is esteemed a very meritorious work; as well as to found Baos's, which are a kind of convent. It is also equally meritorious to contribute to the funerals of their Talapoins, whom they burn with great pomp.

Such magnificence in the obsequies of their Priests, shows in what veneration they are held. They are called Ponguis, and are less informed than the Bramins. Although they are called Talapoins, they have no relation to the Priests of Tibet, and are ignorant of the great Lama, though some authors have asserted to the contrary.

The sovereign is honoured in a manner that approaches to adoration. By a common custom in the East, those who come into his presence, prostrate themselves before him, their hands joined, their feet naked, flung behind them, and gathered back close to their thighs; even the great men are obliged to appear in this humiliating posture, whenever they approach him.

In all ceremonies he sits on a high throne, to show how much he is above all the Princes who compose his court. When he goes out, they dare not remain behind in the city, and great care is taken to shut the gates on such occasions.

Lastly, he believes his power great enough to command all the kings of the earth; so that after dinner it is proclaimed, by the sound of a trumpet, that the

ominotent king of kings has dined, and that all other kings may now have liberty to do the same. He does not believe that any sovereign possesses a territory equally beautiful as his own, and that it is not to be surpassed by any nation: even the people run into this error, as they term all strangers men of wood, and pardon every thing contrary to their customs; imputing it to a natural stupidity, and want of education.

The Emperor has the power of life and death over all his subjects, whom he esteems as slaves. Particulars continually feel the weight of this servitude, which publickly exposes them to want. Whoever is in possession of wealth, gives pensions for the sustenance of the Talapoins, or build pagodas:--if he keeps his money, the governor finds some cause to complaint against him, and he is plundered:--if he conceals his property, and is discovered, his life pays the forfeit, as they suspect he reserves it to promote or form intrigues.

Yet the Pegouin loves his country: he is polite, agreeable, and affable, but inclined to suspicion and wrangling. The laws havenot found a better check than to attack their purse; all abuses have been foreseen, and taxed at a considerable fine,<sup>4</sup> so that you are exempt from all prosecution, provided the tax is paid, with the judge's and clerk's fees. Assassination is, however, excepted; but in this, as in other countries, the lower class are only punished, great men escape, and may, with impunity, be criminal. In a court of justice, the plaintiff is not always sure of his cause. If proofs fail, the parties are plunged into water; he who first rises loses his process; but he may free himself by becoming a slave of the Emperor's body-guard, to whom he gives all his property: by means of this bequest, his adversary has no hold on him.

The Pegouins are very temperate; almost their whole nourishment consisting of vegetables, or rotten fish, which they call Prox, and which serves them for spice, in seasoning their curries. Like other people of the East, they are lascivious. Marriages may be dissolved, the law gives the divorce; but the party who applies for it can carry nothing out of the house, but what they have on their body. Plurality of women, so common throughout all the East, is only tolerated in Pegu, and even forbid by their religion. There are, notwithstanding, convents of public women, where every person is free to go for their money. Women convicted of adultery are obliged to go into these houses, and prostitute themselves. According to the law, men guilty of this crime should be punished with death, but they evade it by paying.

The wives of the common people go almost naked; they are permitted to wear nothing but a kind of petticoat, which reaches no lower than the knee. Gathered behind, it is not a sufficient covering before, so that when a woman

---

<sup>4</sup> In the original translation, a footnote was added at this point on the Roman Empire, which is superfluous to the present account.

walks, you may see the top of her thigh. The wives of great men wear them shorter or longer, according to their rank.

They commonly burn the dead: but great men, and the Talapoins famous for science, are previously embalmed, and put into a leaden coffin. Six months often elapse after their death, before they are carried to the funeral pile.

Voyages to Pegu are not now so lucrative as they were formerly. To make a profit, merchant vessels are obliged to stop at Acheen, where they carry muskets, powder, and small cannon, coarse cloths, gold thread, lace and broad cloth. They receive in exchange, gum, benjamin, camphire and gold, on which there is now only four per cent profit; little is gained on the other articles. And the whole gain amounts to no more than 20 or 25 per cent. The king having the shole commerce to himself, obliges the merchant to sell and purchase at whatever price his agent fixes. But when any goods can be purloined from this Cupidity, they are sold to his oppressed subjects at considerabe profit.

The French, by their compliant manners, had gained the confidence of the Acheeners in preference to the English; but some expeditions which the French made against them, especially those of the ships La Paix, in 1770, and of the Etoile at Borneo, in 775, have totally alienated this distinction. They always remind them of it when they arrive there, and nothing can make them forget it. By this obstacle, all commeerce they wish to carry on with this nation is at an end, as they are a cowardly people, and consequently treacherous and revengeful. When a vessel anchors in the port, one of the ship's officers must pay his court to the king, who must carry also some presents, as he is never approached with empty hands. Formerly the shoes were to be taken off before they entered his apartment; but the cermony is now dispensed with, provided a pair of red cloth shoes is worn over them.

The vessels which go to Pegu, take part of their cargo at Acheen, in Arreki, which must be differently prepared to those which are carried on the Coromandel coast; this detains them near four months, and they complete their cargo with cocoas, on the Nicobar Islands. These two articles delivered at Pegu, always yield a profit of 35 or 40 per cent.

The Japanese customs are in use at Pegu. As soon as a vessel anchors before Rangoon, the governor immediately sends his orders for the guns and rudder to be sent on shore. A faithful account is obliged to be given of the ship's crew, the arms offensive and defensive, the number of bales of goods, and commonly of every thing else on board. They separate what is for the defence and use of the ship, from what is to be disposed of, and after this delcaration, the governor orders a warehouse, where every thing must be deposited.

Till this last article is completely finished, there is no communication. After ll is done, the governor goes on board the vessel with a numerous retinue, who are benefited by the entertainment which is obliged to be given him; and if he

finds any thing on board which has not been reported, even if it was money, he confiscates it. An officer can keep no more than twenty rupees, for the money must be stored as well as the goods; however with this difference, that it pays no duty, and is carefully returned. The visit finished, the governor receives the usual presents, which consist of China, plate, sugar, and boxes of tea. The operations of commerce are often retarded by these preliminaries, as no workman can be procured, if he is ever so much wanted, till they are all entirely fulfilled.

A second visit is paid to all the goods deposited in the magazine. The bales are open for payment of the duties; those of the king consist of ten per cent in kind, as they count out nine pieces, and the tenth is the king's: the clerks, warehouse-keepers, and the person who chaps the goods, have a duty of two and a half per cent. One of the chiefs has also the right of taking five pieces, but not goods of value, as cloths and other high prices merchandize. After all these examinations, the vessel has permission to be loaded.

The teak-wood which they bring from Pegu is excellent for building and furniture. It never rots in the water, so that it is not extraordinary to see vessels, built at Pegu, in use an hundred years. The country is not rich within itself. There are gold, silver, and copper-mines to be found, but they have never been opened. Iron, of a softer nature than ours, is to be found pure, in a mass, from fifteen to twenty pounds fit for use. Rubies, though common, bear however some price, but must be smuggled out of the kingdom; which if detected would cost immense sums, probably imprisonment, and even the confiscation of the vessel.

There are also saphires, emeralds, topases, and aqua marinas to be met with. The Pegouins call these stones fine rubies, and distinguish them by the appellation of blue, green, yello rubies, &c.

Brimstones and pitch are common and cheap. The land is fruitful, but cultivated only for rice. They sow a particular kind, much esteeed on the coast. It is called plot, and dissolves into a jelly on being boiled.

There are no linen or silk manufactures in Pegu. They only make some cotton stuffs for their own consumption. Their other productions are indigo, casia, ivory, the oils of fish, wood and potters earth. Their horses are remarkably handsome; the elephants and buffalos, with which this country abounds, are very large, as well as the sheep and cattle. The most lucrative branch of commerce is saltpetre, which is as common as in Bengal; but this article is particularly prohibited, and the king would never permit of its being exported.

A re-establishment at Pegu would be very advantageous to the commerce of France; but this grant depends on the success their arms may have on the coast of India, and requires peace to be established among the European powers.

End.